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ABSTRACT

The document is a transcript of the radio program, "Options in Education," for the week of July 4, 1977. Broadcast by member stations of the National Public Radio System, the program is an electronic weekly magazine devoted to the coverage of news, features, policy, and people in the field of education. The issues highlighted in this program revolve around influence of educational critics, the relationship between educational criticism and political ideology, teachers' impressions of the critics, and critics' impressions of teachers. Critics include John Holt, Diane Ravitch, Herb Kohl, Eliot Wigginton, Jonathon Kozol, Ivan Illich, and George Dennison. Changes that have occurred in the thinking of these critics since their work appeared in the 1960's are explored. These changes include disillusionment, disinterest, difficulty in accepting the fact that new educational reformers are now more acceptable, and belief that schools are better than they were 15 years ago as a result of criticism leveled against the educational system. (Author/DB)

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

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CRITICS REVISITED

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Program #84 The Critics Revisited

July 4, 1977

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CRITICS REVISITED

HOLT: School is a place where children learn to be stupid. I used to think that it was an accident, and that if I went around and said to everybody, "Hey, everybody, this stuff we do in school is making kids stupid. So, we shouldn't do it." I used to think they'd stop. Well, they didn't stop and it took me a while to figure out that the essential social purpose of schools is - and has always been - to make people fit for the factory.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair. And that was John Holt, one of the most prominent critics of schooling in America.

MERROW: John Holt came on the scene in 1964 with a book called "How Children Fail." He was followed by other authors - Jonathan Kozol, George Dennison, James Herndon, and Herbert Kohl.

BLAIR: These school critics were part of a movement in the Sixties and early Seventies that scrutinized all aspects of American society. Their criticism angered some people, and persuaded others that schools needed to be changed.

MERROW: This week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION we're going to revisit those critics and see how their ideas are different now ten or fifteen years later. We'll also meet some new education reformers.

("Education," Schoolboys in Disguise, by The Kinks, RCA LPL1-5102)

SOME OF THE PEOPLE YOU'LL HEAR ON TODAY'S SHOW

All of them show a hostility to schools, and especially to public schools. Institutions become a way of making people do what they wouldn't do if they were truly free.

How can I free myself from my dependence on these huge, remote, uncontrollable institutions, and find ways to work more directly to get to things that I feel I want.

I work in the context of the public schools, and I don't believe they should exist.

BLAIR: Some of those school critics may be familiar to you - like Jonathan Kozol and George Dennison.

MERROW: Others, like Miles Horton or Ivan Illich, may be less well known, but they all have one thing in common. They think public schools are harming our children.

BLAIR: They've called schools "incompetent," "uncaring," "cold," "inefficient," and even "murderously destructive."

MERROW But let's start with some history. School criticism didn't begin in the 1960's.

DIANE RAVITCH

RAVITCH: Criticism of the schools is nothing new. Conservatives have always complained that the schools cost too much; that there were too many fads and frills; that they were altogether too egalitarian. Liberals have always complained that the schools were neglected. There was not enough money to provide the kind of facilities and personnel to permit the schools to function effectively. Religious groups have complained periodically that the schools were godless or that they were insidiously teaching about somebody else's god. Political groups have complained that the schools were too patriotic, or that they were not patriotic enough.

MERROW: Diane Ravitch, an historian at Teachers College, Columbia University. Ravitch says that criticism of schools is needed, but that many of the new writers who emerged in the 1960's confused criticism of education with political ideology. She spoke recently at a meeting of the American Federation of Teachers here in Washington.

BLAIR: Ravitch has special scorn for the radical critics who abandon the system. She says they ignore the real successes of American public education.

MERROW: The school critics by and large are a part of a diverse, alternative, non-public school movement. Recently, I went to a conference in Chicago called "Education for Change" along with about 1,000 alternative educators. They're disillusioned with public schools, and most of them are considerably left of center politically.

BLAIR: One of the participants was George Dennison, who wrote "The Lives of Children," based on Dennison's two years of teaching in a free school, The First Street School in New York City. His book asserts that when schools are kept small enough, they can be effective and humane.

GEORGE DENNISON

DENNISON: Why couldn't the big schools be torn apart or turned into bowling alleys and you get these small schools scattered all over the place. I mean, it's the most feasible thing, and it's much, much cheaper than doing these monstrous schools.

MERROW: At one point in the book, in "The Lives of Children," you're talking about José. You write, "José's reading problem is José, or to put it another way, there's no such thing as a 'reading problem.' A reading problem, in short, is not a fact of life, but a fact of school administration - i.e., the action of ignoring everything about José except his response to printed letters." What I hear you saying there is that José's problem is a whole fabric of insufficiencies. It's not a 'reading problem.' It's all these different things about José. Yet, at the same time, you're holding the school responsible. Now, if it's this whole fabric of problems, why can you blame the schools?

DENNISON: Oh, well if the school makes the kid ashamed of himself, it's himself that he's ashamed of. He goes around in a condition of being ashamed. Or if they force embarrassment on him, or treat him with contempt, or if he finds himself in an ongoing situation of injustice.

MERROW: But do schools do that? Do schools treat kids with contempt?

DENNISON: Of course! José was a Spanish-speaking kid. I point out in the book that when he first came to this country at the age of seven, or something like that, he could read a little Spanish and a little English.

MERROW: He was translating the postcards and letters for his parents.

DENNISON: Right. And at that time in New York - now this has changed - there weren't any Spanish-speaking teachers in the school. Kids whose first language was Spanish, they couldn't understand what was happening, but they were expected to learn to read.

MERROW: What you're saying in that book, and you still believe it, that the teacher's task is not mere instruction, but a continuum of persons, the reality of encounter. The teacher is responsible for the whole child. I can hear teachers all over this country saying, "Well, that's grand. That's fine. But I've got 36 kids in my class."

DENNISON: Well, the teachers are right. Part of the hope of the free school idea is to free the teacher as well as the child. There are pretty good teachers who are trapped in a system where their decisions are taken from them. This is absurd, you know? A teacher who's trying to hold down a job by answering the demands of the administration, and also has to cope with 35 kids or something, it can't be done. It can't be done.

MERROW: How about some practical suggestions for what a teacher should do to have a better relationship with kids? Share the lunchroom? Some really down-home practical suggestions.

DENNISON: You mean in school? Public schools? I'm not the one to ask about that. I don't know much about that.

MERROW: That's copping out.

DENNISON: What do you mean "copping out?" I've never taught in the public schools. I couldn't stand it for a minute.

BLAIR: George Dennison, author of "The Lives of Children."

MERROW: Dennison describes himself as a "drop-out," no longer teaches, but is writing fiction and plays. The book continues to have an impact. It was recently translated into Japanese, the tenth language so far.

TEACHERS WHO ARE STILL TEACHING DISCUSS THE CRITICS

BLAIR: We asked some still active teachers at the Education for Change Conference whether or not the writings of Dennison and other critics influenced their decision to teach in alternative schools.

TEACHER: Basically, I react negatively to most of those people. And I really resent, I guess, their attempts to sort of rest on the laurels of a few books that they've written, and maybe a year or two of experience that they've had in schools.

MERROW: You sound like you feel a little ripped off.

TEACHER: Yeah. Also, another thing I resent is that it's all male. All the super-heroes are male, and it's the women who basically run the movement more or less.

TEACHER: I've read all the ones that you've mentioned. But I think I enjoyed John Holt's things that he discovered about young children, and how young children learn.

MERROW: Is Holt the kind of writer that you feel you could call up - or whatever it is that Holden Caulfield said?

TEACHER: I tried. He answered my letters, but not my phone calls. He's changed his attitudes considerably since the time I read his books. I don't think I'd agree with him anymore because he's more, I believe, of the point of view now that you just open the doors up, and those people who want to come can come, and those people who don't want to come, fine. I think it's a really "give-up" attitude. And I think that from the thrust of all of those lectures over there they're mixing education and politics.

TEACHER: I think the children influenced me the most - the fact that their needs aren't being fulfilled by public schools, and that they are hurting. And they need the alternative schools.

JOHN HOLT

BLAIR: One of the names those teachers mentioned is John Holt. He has written eight books about school, children and education, but like George Dennison, Holt no longer teaches.

MERROW: I asked John Holt how he has changed since the diaries he kept in 1959 became his first book, "How Children Fail." In that book, he said that school was a place where children learn to be stupid.

HOLT: What I've now come to feel is that that's not an accident. I used to think it was an accident, and that if I went around and said to everybody, "Hey, everybody. The stuff we do in school is making kids stupid. So, we shouldn't do it." I used to think they'd stop. Well, they didn't stop and it took me a while to figure out that the essential social purpose of schools is - and has always been - to make people fit for the factory. And it does that really quite well because it runs like the factory. So, as I say, I don't believe, in other words, that the schools are failing to do something - as "make children intelligent, curious, informed" - which the vast majority of the population wants them to do. On the contrary, I think the schools are doing what they were originally founded to do, and what the vast majority of people do want them to do - which is to teach children to shut up, do-what-you're-told, work on schedules, accept boredom, alienation, impotence.

MERROW: The schools are actually doing a good job?

HOLT: They're doing a fine job. Yeah, they're doing a good job.

MERROW: What's the solution then? Do you want to get rid of school?

HOLT: I don't like the idea of education any longer. And that word seems to me to have two notions embedded in it,both of which I think are wrong, mistaken, harmful, destructive. The first is the idea that education or learning is a kind of process separate from the rest of life. Most people come to feel that the things they did not learn in school are not important, have no legitimacy, no worth, no value, and that, conversely, if you want to learn things which are important, you must go to places called schools to learn them and, furthermore, you must be taught them by people called teachers, who don't do anything else except to be teachers.

Now, this is a very recent notion and, I think, a very bad one. I don't learn things that way. And I learn things all the time. And the other notion embedded in the idea of education is compulsory learning. In other countries, we call it "brainwashing." We see it very clearly for what it is when we're looking at Russia or China.

MERROW: In other countries, it's also called "socialization;" passing on the basic tenets of a culture.

HOLT: The basic tenets of a culture don't need to be passed on. We are social. We are born social, cultural, animal. Furthermore, the culture that's passed on in the schools is not the culture of the whole society which even today has a certain variety and richness. It's the culture of the factory, and the most degraded form or sub-culture or one of the most degraded.

MERROW: In 1959, Mr. Holt, you made a couple of observations in that book which grew out of your experiences -- that school is a place for right answers; not for thinkers, but for producers; that fear is present all the time, and fear is the great destroyer of intelligence; most children in most schools are afraid most of the time you said in effect. You said that teachers and schools tend to mistake good behavior for good character, and, above all, they prize docility and suggestability.

HOLT: I have come to feel that what I said was true about teachers in schools. (They value "right" answers. They value good behavior.) It's also true of the vast majority of people in society.

MERROW: But I don't want that for my kids. And you wouldn't want that for your kids, and he wouldn't want that for his kids. That's what I want to get at because it seems to me that that's the quintessential - if that's the right word - elitist statement to say that most parents are really satisfied with the "factory mode" for schooling, and it's only a small bunch, you and me, who really know what their kids ought to have.

HOLT: You know, if you don't agree with it, you don't have to. All I say is to those people, whoever they may be, however many they may be, if you feel this way about schools, you'd better start thinking about ways to get your kids out of them altogether.

BLAIR: Author John Holt at the Alternative School Conference called, "Education for Change." Holt now disagrees with George Dennison about the value of schools. He says we must "de-school" society, making schools smaller and more humane isn't radical enough.

MERROW: Holt and Dennison are both out of teaching, but another author is still in the classroom, Herb Kohl.

HERB KOHL

KOHL: I work in the context of the public schools, and I don't believe they should exist, and I don't believe that this particular kind of society should continue and perpetuate itself. And I don't believe that schools should be organized according to principles of competition.

The question is though that the children who we have to reach are there.

BLAIR: Herb Kohl wrote "36 Children" and nine other books about schooling and children. He teaches first grade in Berkeley, California.

KOHL: Now, the only way in which I see it changing . . no, no. There are many different ways to begin to change schools. But one of my own personal passionate concerns is for those children who happen to be there these days. So that I, therefore, assume the quite crazy role of going right into the middle of the beast and trying to do the best I can with the kids - while in my writing and other work try to do everything I can to tear it down. It's like what I wrote about in my book, "Half the House." It's almost like you're at sea on a sinking ship, and you're required to rebuild it right in the middle of the sea with no new materials coming from anywhere. And, so, I'm trying to dismantle something, and rebuild a new form at the same time while we've got to keep afloat.

MERROW: That's a manifestly impossible task, no?

KOHL: Well, it might be smaller when you get done. No. It's not impossible. It might look differently. It might be a smaller ship.

MERROW: But it will float?

KOHL: But it will float, and it probably will be a better place to live. The task of changing is clearly very difficult. My problem is that I happen to love teaching kids. And that's what keeps me alive, and keeps

me going in this whole larger struggle to change this society.

MERROW: That's an interesting point. Of the writers who came into prominence in the late 60's, early 70's, I think maybe you're the only one who's still teaching.

KOHL: I guess the difference is that I primarily consider myself a teacher. And it's that double focus - of the people who started writing, I think, I was probably the only one who was especially concerned with the interaction in a situation where something's being learned in a classroom or between people. That is, a lot of other people have been talking also about this system, the context in which it takes place, but you see in any society that I would live in I would also be a teacher. I'm not doing it for the lack of something else, or writing about what I do as a means of just criticizing something.

MERROW: I guess what I'd like to know is how you've changed since that first book, "36 Children." I mean, you're still teaching. You're still teaching kids of about the same age. How are you a different person?

KOHL: How am I different? I'm older. I've got three children myself. I'm a parent which is not an insignificant event in one's life. So, I'm not only a public school teacher, but even more urgently concerned because I have three children in the public schools. The other thing is that I've had the benefit of working with people like Miles Horton and Paolo Freire to put the struggles that I'm involved in in the everyday level as a practicing teacher and a writer in the context of larger political and social struggles taking place both here and over the whole world. But I don't think, fundamentally, other than the change that comes from growing older and still liking what you're doing that I've changed very much.

MERROW: Did you believe when you were teaching those 36 children that the public school system had to be destroyed, had to be changed completely? I don't remember reading the book that way.

KOHL: My anger . . well, it was more despair at that point when I wrote the book. One goes through despair and then gets alive again. For me, it was through teaching again. And working with kids again. But, you see, I don't have this sense of "destroy the public school system" in quite the same way as people like, say, John Holt. I have no problem with schools. It's the question of the society they serve - the goals and ends they serve, and how they function.

MERROW: Tell me what you have left to do. What is it you want to do next year when you're teaching?

KOHL: Oh, next year.

MERROW: I mean next year and the year after that.

KOHL: Oh, I don't live that far ahead. In terms of next year's teaching, oh, I'm going to make feature films, and we're going to set up a radio broadcasting station with the kids, and we're going to produce all kind of radio dramas, and we're going to write novels.

MERROW: These are public school kids?

KOHL: Yeah. Sure.

MERROW: And this is in the Berkeley Public School System?

KOHL: Yeah.

MERROW: Can that happen anywhere, do you think?

KOHL: Yeah.

MERROW: How?

KOHL: By doing it. By having the teacher get strong enough and bold enough to try to do it - AND - and this is the crucial thing - going and spending a lot of time and energy convincing the parents that what you're doing makes sense. In other words, spending that extra effort going into the community you work in saying, "I'm doing this because it's going to make your kids stronger, more capable of thinking for themselves, more able to command this technology which is commanding us instead. And with the support of parents . . ." You know, you might get fired. I mean, let's put it this way. You can do it. I've seen it done in the most unlikely places. Places in Stockton, Modesto, Detroit . . . I mean, you name it. All kinds of places where people are, in fact, doing it. So, it's not a question of, "Can you?" It's a question of -- Do you dare to? Are you bold enough to? And for people like myself, what else would one do? What do you want to do? Stand up in front of the room and read those same textbooks every year over and over again?

MERROW: Basically, are you optimistic that the sinking ship of the public schools can be rebuilt, and something new . . .

KOHL: I wasn't talking about the public schools. I was talking about the society, the whole society. No. I don't want to rebuild the society. What I want to do is take the best of what's in our culture, and try to create some sane, sensible, socialist America.

MERROW: And are you optimistic? Can that happen?

KOHL: Don't know. Just working on it.

BLAIR: Author Herb Kohl.

("The Hard Way" - Sung by The Kinks, Schoolboys in Disguise, RCA LPL1-5102)

ELLIOT WIGGINTON EXPLAINS THE "FOXFIRE" PROJECT

BLAIR: Herb Kohl said change can happen in the most unlikely places. And it is. It's happening in Rabun Gap, Georgia because of "Foxfire" and Elliot Wigginton. Wigginton has a philosophy of education based on what he describes as "peak experiences."

WIGGINTON: A peak experience is one that gives you a sudden flash of insight either about yourself or about the world around you that changes the way you look at either yourself or the world around you, or both. Suddenly, for the first time, you see a whole new range of philosophy or understanding that you didn't even know existed before. Suddenly, you become aware of the fact that you have some real confidence as a human being. Suddenly,

you become aware of the fact that you have a lot more options than you ever thought were possible, and you can exercise those options. You're not limited by choice.

BLAIR: Elliot Wigginton is a teacher whose words and deeds are making their mark on schools around the country. During the 1960's, Wigginton wasn't writing or teaching. He was still in college.

MORROW: Since the early 1970's, his "Foxfire" project in Rabun Gap, Georgia has been proving that good things can happen inside the public school system. The "Foxfire" books are written and produced by high school students, and they tell stories about the students' own communities. These books are the end-product of a process that Wigginton believes leads students to those peak experiences. I asked him if a teacher can plan peak experiences.

WIGGINTON: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Sure, sure. You can set it up, for example, so that . . . well, the very fact of a student's work being printed in a magazine which gets read by thousands of people is for most of the kids we work with one of their peak experiences. A student who's never taken a photograph before takes a photograph, goes into the dark room, develops the film and prints the picture. That's a peak experience for most kids. Not all kids, but for most of them. When that picture comes up through the developer, you know something's happened inside their head, and there's a whole new cluster of brain cells clicking that weren't clicking before, and it's those magical moments, you know, where you suddenly say, "Right. I suddenly understand now a whole bunch of stuff that I never understood before." And you can very definitely set those things up. What you do is identify all the times at which your students seem most excited. The kids that come back five years later say to you, "Do you remember when we did this together? Well, that stuck and I've never forgot that." And all of that kind of feedback comes in from the kids themselves, and you say, "Okay." And you pick those things, and build them into your program, and make sure that every student that you've run through your program is exposed to those same experiences before they leave.

MORROW: I wish you'd tell the story about airports. I know you travel a fair amount, and that you try to take a kid with you. Tell us what you do and how that works into being a memorable kind of thing.

WIGGINTON: Yeah. That's another kind of example. It's another example of the way a teacher through a "hands-off," but still a "protecting" relationship, can create those experiences. One of the things that we demand is that whenever we go anyplace to give a talk at a conference, one or two of the students will be allowed to come along and their expenses paid. And we always try to get to the airport a couple of hours early because most of the kids I take have never been on a plane before, never been to an airport or whatever. And they come in, and say, "Well, where are our tickets?" And I say, "Well, I don't have any idea. It's your job to find them. You know, here we are. Go look!" And a half-hour later they're able to come up with them usually, and they say, "Okay. Where do we go now? Where's the gate?" And I say, "I don't know. Start looking." And I'll follow along behind as they make their way through that place. Once we get to the plane, and we're on it, and the stewardess says, "This plane is, in fact, going to Milwaukee. You've got the right one." The kid sits back in the seat and say, "Okay. Now I understand something I didn't understand before. I don't have to be afraid of this situation again."

MERROW: Is that a transferable kind of experience?

WIGGINTON: Transferable?

MERROW: I mean, the next time they're in a strange environment . . .

WIGGINTON: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. You know, you can knock off that whole cluster of things known as "public buildings," in which you have to find information. And it's very definitely transferable.

MERROW: Teachers and power. Is it your idea that teachers are really very powerful people?

WIGGINTON: Absolutely. Maybe too powerful. I don't know. The best illustration, I guess, of that that I can give is the fact that if you have a room full of people at a conference, and you ask them to begin to relate experiences that they've had at the hands of teachers, you'll often find how crucial those experiences were to their lives. Now, in many cases, those experiences were negative ones. They'll say, "I never enjoyed school. And you know the reason why I never did? It's because in the 6th grade I had this teacher, and she used to do this and this and this, and in the 7th grade I had this teacher . . ." Or, on the opposite side of the coin, they may have turned out to be very significant, positive experiences, the sort of peak experiences that I was talking about earlier. My own English teacher, for example, in the 10th grade who saw to it that one of the compositions that I had written, as a bad high school student, who had to repeat the 9th grade, etc., got published in the school's literary magazine, and probably because of that experience I eventually wound up becoming an English teacher and starting a magazine. And I can trace the whole structure of my life directly back to the 30-40 second involvement with that teacher in getting that piece of work published.

MERROW: Foxfire has been a success beyond, what has to be, your wildest imagination. You have 110 acres of land with 22 buildings. Has it gotten bureaucratic? The idea was that it would be decentralized, and kids would participate in all of the decisions. Has that happened?

WIGGINTON: Yeah. That still is very much a part of the program because each of those new divisions has been set up specifically in that way. And together they choose the budget. Together they decide what their activities are going to be. Together they make the decisions that concern that particular project and so on. In every case, each of those divisions is precisely like Foxfire Magazine was in its infancy - where one teacher and a group of students shaped its whole future, and put it together.

MERROW: The writings of Jonathan Kozol, Herb Kohl, John Holt, George Dennison. Have they influenced you in leading you to start up Foxfire?

WIGGINTON: It didn't influence me directly in the beginning of the project, in the starting of the project. When I first got into it, I didn't know Jonathon Kozol or Herb Kohl. They were a very, very direct force, however, in shaping the directions that the whole project took as it began to make some sense, and began to go. I was lucky enough, for example, to be invited to a conference in '68 where I met Herb, and where we sat down, and he said, "Do you see some of the possibilities for you being able to really make something positive and effective happen in that school because you've got a good start. But look what else. I know a school, for example, where this happened and this happened." And, you know, he was able to open up my eyes to a whole range of possibilities that I hadn't even considered.

MERROW: What you're doing demonstrates pretty clearly that you do believe that things really can happen in the schools. Since 90% of the kids do go to the public schools that's where you have to stay.

WIGGINTON: I feel like we're almost more in tune at this point with Kozol in the whole thing that he's into now about how it's absolutely essential to sensitize those kids wherever they happen to be to their own communities and to the people whose lives they may affect if they get into positions of power. That's really a crucial ingredient in what we're doing. If our kids in any of these public schools are going to be moving into management positions after college, they really need to know how a community is set up and whose lives they're going to be affecting by the decisions they make down the road, when they become bureaucrats and management people themselves. So, that notion of Kozol's is one that's really hitting us hard right now.

MERROW: One last question: Will success spoil Foxfire? I mean, you're doubling in size next year. You've got all this money pouring in and all these new enterprises. Are you worried?

WIGGINTON: Sure. I'm always worried about that. That's one of the reasons why we have a staff meeting every week to hash that stuff out. And that's one of the reasons why I come to a conference like this where I know Herb and people like that are going to be because they're sort of sounding boards and touchstones, and I can bounce things off their heads, and have them react. Herb's been down to Rabun Gap recently and spent three days there to really take a look at it. And I asked him, "Okay. Are we still on track? We think we are, and it feels right to us. But from your perspective, what do you think?" And he says, "Yep. You're right on the money."

I think that the relationship we have with the kids is so strong and so close on a day-to-day working basis -- during school, after school hours, and way into the evenings. And through our staff meetings we talk things out so extensively among ourselves. Are we really keeping this thing on schedule and on track? I think we're going to be able to handle that. I think we've got it under control.

BLAIR: Elliot Wigginton.

MERROW: Incidentally, the Foxfire books earned $450,000 in royalties in 1976, and soon the Foxfire project will be producing furniture, books, crafts, records and films, and all inside the public schools.

THE INFLUENCE OF CRITICS ON TEACHERS

TEACHER: I'm a former public school teacher, working in the public schools for five years in Detroit. And I think the writings of all of those people plus the birth and the imminent entrance of my own daughter into public school forced me to really come to grips about my own feelings about the whole school system.

MERROW: Which of the writers would you identify as having the greatest influence on you?

TEACHER: Well, I think it was probably Kozol initially.

MERROW: "Death at an Early Age?"

TEACHER: Yes. "Death at an Early Age." But also an article in Newsweek by Peter Maron who worked with a specific high school in California. And that was in Newsweek of all places -- called "Children of the Apocalypse." That was a long, long time ago, and it was an article that really said it for me that if children weren't allowed to be free and creative and independent; that there really was no way that we could change anything in this world. We're all coming to realize, for example, that alternative education not only should be an option, but MUST exist.

TEACHER: Much of the need for me to get into alternative education came from, basically, my own dissatisfaction. It wasn't so much from reading. That came later, I guess.

TEACHER: I was willing to work with the system for 3-5 years, and did so, and as I came into contact with more of these kinds of writers, I was given more power to try an alternative. But I think, for the most part, my frustrations led me into alternative schools because of what I could see happening with teachers labeling children.

TEACHER: I've been influenced by A.S. Neill to come to think of it very strongly because he's very practical. He has lots of experience, and he gives you practical examples of kids -- not only were they happy as I saw them daily in school, but they grew up to become successful in dealing with life, happy people. And even though they couldn't read when they were 17, they still made it.

MERROW: So, you were influenced by A. S. Neill, the author of "Summerhill."

TEACHER: More than anything else, I would say yes.

TEACHER: I read Jonathan Kozol's "The Night Is Dark And I Am Far From Home." And it moved me. And I saw the inequities that he was talking about. I understood it further, entrenched my belief that the things going on in schools, the knowledge in public schools that is being taught, is quite a bit off the track.

(David Campbell sings "Teachin' School Disease.")

BLAIR: A lot of the teachers John spoke to mentioned A. S. Neill, the founder of the Summerhill School in England. Summerhill was one of the first "free" schools organized to give students an equal voice in decisions about behavior and curriculum.

MERROW: Ivan Illich and Paolo Freire are also among the leading thinkers in the alternative school movement. Freire was at the meeting, but did not attend any of the workshops or large assemblies, and he asked not to be interviewed on tape. But he did talk with some participants. Each evening, a small group of teachers and authors would have roundtable seminars with Freire.

BLAIR: It's impossible to summarize Freire's thoughts in a few words, but one central tenet is that literacy frees people, and that anyone can learn to read if he's given words that accurately describe his true condition.

MERROW: Freire was kicked out of Brazil precisely because he was teaching peasants to read by providing them with words to describe their country's dictatorial rule.

BLAIR: Before we start feeling smug about our country, he wasn't offered a teaching job at Harvard either - despite Harvard students' keen interest in him and his work.

MERROW: In a sense, there are two central schools of thought among the critics. One represented by Ivan Illich and his disciple, John Holt. The other led by Paolo Freire. Ivan Illich is an advocate of what he calls "deschooling" -- we need to get rid of the institution and educate instead in families, in apprenticeships, and storefronts.

BLAIR: Paolo Freire is the leader of the other group, and his most prominent disciple is Jonathan Kozol.

MERROW: Kozol disappointed many at the Chicago meeting of the alternative school network by canceling at the last minute. He went to Cuba instead.

BLAIR: Kozol has written three books, and each one takes a harder line than the last. "Death at an Early Age" attacks the Boston public schools for their indifference to poor, black children."Free Schools" excoriates those who dropped out of the struggle and formed communes and schools off in the mountains instead.

MERROW: Most recently, "The Night Is Dark And I Am Far From Home" concludes that the schools are very efficient machines set up to perpetuate an evil, unjust, capitalist system. Schools keep the poor in place, and they keep the rest of us from feeling any anguish about the social system.

BLAIR: Kozol ends by calling for a full scale subversive attack on schools by teachers within the system, and he says his next book will tell teachers how to go about it.

MERROW: It's a handbook for action, and when I talked with Jonathan Kozol by telephone, I asked him what it would say.

JONATHAN KOZOL

KOZOL: "Freedom is never given to people as a gift," to quote the great Brazilian scholar, Paolo Freire. "It is only acquired by conquest." What is essential is that teachers start at the grass roots. It's not simply a matter of what will be in a book I publish one year from now. It's a matter of what teachers are already doing throughout the country. I didn't dream up these ideas. I learned what I write about from other teachers.

Throughout the country, for example, from coast to coast, there are now dozens - probably hundreds - of small, independent, non-government supported, irreverent teacher centers. And I'm being quite specific now. This is twenty light years away from the ethereal abstractions of John Holt or Ivan Illich. I'm talking about things you really can think about tonight and do tomorrow morning. They go out, rent a little storefront in a cheap neighborhood, something that doesn't require a grant or research study, or a feasibility program from the Carnegie Foundation -- something they can do by pooling the cash in their pocket, maybe for $80 a month.

What happened is they very quickly draw in - not six or seven - but twenty or thirty, and then within a matter of months, or within a year or two, if they have that real sticking power, and the ones

I've seen do, they get 200 to 300 to 400 teachers in a middle-sized city coming around regularly.

MERROW: Is it your notion, then, that this will radicalize these teachers and somehow they're going to take over the system?

KOZOL: It's not a notion. I hate notions. I only believe in convictions. It's a conviction based upon observation. At least at a couple of dozen of these places, not just observation, but participation.

MERROW: But you're saying, then, the schools could be changed if we had enough teachers who thought, in effect, the way you do.

KOZOL: Well, let me add the final ingredient which is really the end of the blueprint. The moment of breakthrough, in terms of power, arrives when teachers who come together in these, as I estimate, a couple of hundred teacher centers around the country at this point . . . when the 100 to 400 teachers suddenly get the brainstorm to have an open house for parents who have shown anything like empathy, openess or interest in what they're doing, and at this point they develop a constituency, which is not just teachers, but it's teachers, parents, and sophisticated kids - often as young as ten or twelve, but more often kids who are in their last years of high school. And they represent a force which cannot be sneezed at.

Every movement of any significance in the United States - including the major, monolithic unions that we're faced with today - started from small, grass roots efforts of this kind. I believe in a slogan which we've been using in all of the struggles that I've been involved in for the past decade . . . . "Bigness doesn't matter. Small enough to win." The whole point of this is to start small.

MERROW: But, John, if the parents and the teachers then get the power, what do they do?

KOZOL: When they get the power, they take over the school board, and if they don't take over the school board, at the very least they're in a position to make it very, very difficult for a school system - especially a small or middle-sized school system - to fire the teacher who is speaking the truth on foolish grounds, to fire that teacher without an enormous reaction in the community. You know, many school systems around the country, many principals who are conservative principals, will say to me, "We would get rid of that guy in two hours if it weren't for the fact that we'd have 400 people on our hands."

MERROW: Where are the communities where this is happening?

KOZOL: I've seen this in the Twin Cities. I've seen this in Portland, Oregon. I've seen it in Seattle. I've seen it in Canada, out in Vancouver. It's happening all over Canada, as a matter of fact. I've seen it in several of the suburban communities around Chicago. I've seen it in Connecticut, in New Haven and Bridgeport and several other small middle-sized cities. I've seen it in Boston.

MERROW: Jonathan Kozol, author of "The Night Is Dark And I Am Far From Home."

BLAIR: What impact have the critics had? Are schools better than they were ten or fifteen years ago? And, if so, can the critics claim credit?

MILES HORTON

MERROW: I asked Miles Horton about the impact of critics on the schools. Horton doesn't really like to be called "the grand old man of the alternative schools movement," but the description is appropriate. He started the Highlander School in Tennessee back in 1932, and he's been faithful to his vision of a socialist America throughout the years.

BLAIR: "Yes," says Miles Horton, "there has been a change in the schools." But he believes it's a change in society that will have the greatest impact.

HORTON: There was another period in the late 20's and early 30's that's quite similar - the same kind of criticism. I don't think either of those periods have touched the school system. What those criticisms have done, it seems to me, have been to get a lot of people interested in alternate education. And, maybe, after all, that's the best thing because the school system can't be changed until the ideological system under which it operates, the capitalistic system, is changed.

MERROW: Let me argue with you on that point. And you have probably heard this criticism before. But the criticism goes this way. You're taking a position of . . . it's a luxurious position that is essentially irrelevant to the world. You're saying -- The schools can't be changed until the whole system is changed. Now, what that means is that by taking that attitude, you're dooming so many millions of kids who are in the public school system. Ninty percent of the kids go to public schools. Yet, you say that we have to wait until the system's changed, and that's like doing nothing.

HORTON: Well, if you're convinced, as I am, that all school systems are appendages to the economy of which they are a part. The education in China is as much an instrument of the socialist system in China as our schools are an instrument of capitalism in the United States. They serve that system. They're locked into that system. Everything I say about schools in the United States I could say about the schools in China. Now, you could evaluate them, and say, "Which system is better? Which produces the best schools?" But I think it's a sound position to take if you really believe that - that's your analysis. And if it is your analysis, it doesn't mean that you're not interested in affecting education. There are reforms that go on all the time in education. There are reforms that go on in our unions, and there are reforms that go on in other parts of the so-called "free enterprise system." But those reforms only tend to strengthen the system and make it more acceptable. They don't change the system.

MERROW: I don't have to carry what you're saying very far to conclude that working for change in the schools is foolhardy, is foolish.

HORTON: No, no. You should work for change wherever you are. If you're in a factory, you work for change there. Or if you're in a public school system, you work for change. If you're in a university, you work for change. If you're in an alternate school, you work for change. You work for change wherever you are. And that change for people in the school system would be directed at changing institutions of which they are a part. But I'm just saying that you can't fundamentally change any of these

institutions - labor unions, schools, or the government. Fundamental change cannot be brought about until the system, as a whole, is changed.

MERROW: But the public school system may be worse today than it was 15 years ago.

HORTON: Yes. But you can't expect a few writers, a few experimenters, a few people like those of us at Highlander to change a system that's locked into the capitalist system. No. That's beyond our possibility of changing.

BLAIR: Miles Horton at the Education for Change Meeting in Chicago.

NAT HENTOFF

MERROW: Nat Hentoff, a journalist for The Village Voice writes books critical of the schools, including "Does Anybody Give a Damn?". He talked with Connie Goldman about the influence of the critics.

HENTOFF: I think by no means was the Sixties a dead loss. Quite the opposite. The only thing that I deplore that came out of it was this kind of apocalyptic nonsense that I talked about. "Deschooling" and the notion of some of the young, radical people in education now - who, themselves, have tenure, and obviously have advanced degrees - that until you can bring socialism to this country, until you have that revolution, it's a waste of time to do anything about the schools. Well, again, it's that awful middle class, largely white, patronizing nonsense that has no relationship to the reality of the kids who are trapped in those schools. Are they supposed to wait another generation until Emma Goldman's picture gets hung in the White House. I mean, it's ridiculous.

GOLDMAN: So, the critics of the Sixties, and the critics of the Seventies have something - even though they might criticize one another - you're one of the few that's stayed around and transcended . . . . .

HENTOFF: Well, Herb Kohl is still here, and Herb has done, I think, marvelous work. I mean, he's one of the very few who's stayed in the classroom.

GOLDMAN: And, yet, these critics of both decades have something in common in your opinion -- that they were really dealing with middle class, white kids, and that the real problems in education in this country have really not been focused on in any kind of energetic way as yet.

HENTOFF: Well, let me qualify that a bit. I said Jonathan Kozol has been focusing on black kids, and he used to teach in a Freedom School in Boston. On the other hand, Jonathon - and I think very valuably - in his last couple of books has made the point that ought not to be overlooked. Let me put my own view in here, and then his. My own view is that the people who are most harmed by the public school system as it is now are poor people - white, Chicano, black, whatever - because they are told by the school system until they begin to believe it that they're dumb, that there's only so much they can achieve in this society. And the result of that is catastrophic - spiritually and every other way. If you accept my view that that is the case, that does not mean that the middle-class, white kids in the public

schools get off with impunity because what happens to them, and Jonathan keeps focusing on this, is a deadening process. I mean, after all, I have always made the connection between the fact that this nation overwhelmingly re-elected Richard Nixon. Overwhelmingly. Granted that McGovern wasn't the greatest candidate in the world, but knowing who Nixon was I connect that with schooling - because the people who could do that weren't thinking. They did not know how to think. They had forgotten how to think if they ever knew. So, schooling blights everybody. It just happens to blight the people who are most without power the worst.

GOLDMAN: Are you optimistic at all?

HENTOFF: No. On the other hand, I think pessimism is a self-indulgence and a luxury. One of the things that most outraged me in the last few years that came out of the kind of decline in hope in terms of all the writings of the Sixties about reforming the schools - but I was absolutely furious at Ivan Illich and John Holt, who's a friend of mine, in the last couple of books that John has written -- this notion that you have to give up hope entirely. There is no way to change the school system. What do you do then? Well, what you do then, and I've never understood what they were talking about, is set up some kind of learning networks outside. What does that mean to a kid in Bedford-Stuyvesant, or a kid in the Black section of Washington, or the Chicano section of Los Angeles? It's an absolute cop-out. There is no alternative for these kids! They've got to learn to read and write, and there's no other place for them but the public schools.

BLAIR: Writer Nat Hentoff talking with Corrie Goldman. For Hentoff, staying in the public schools is crucial because that's where 95% of the students are.

DIANE RAVITCH

MERROW: Diane Ravitch, an educational historian, doesn't think the critics, especially Kozol, have helped. Ravitch says that the American experiment in universal schooling has been a great success, and that the critics fail to appreciate that.

RAVITCH: At one time or another, the schools were everyone's favorite scapegoat. What's new in the past decade is that the attack on the schools has come predominantly from radical critics. We have heard it said that the schools commit "educational genocide," "they're destroying the hearts and minds of America's children," "that they're class-biased, race-biased, sex-biased, age-biased." Jonathan Kozol, in his most recent book, charges that the public schools "mass produce murderers, or else soul-broken automatons for an unjust social order." And he traces the tragedies in Vietnam directly to the public schools. He says, "The public schools prepared people for twelve years to go out and kill people." Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintes in their recent book, "Schooling in Capitalist America," claimed that the schools do nothing more than reproduce the class structure from generation to generation.

Still others have asserted that schooling is irrelevant, that it has no impact on people's ability to get ahead in society, and that it simply doesn't make a difference. What is schooling for, then? According to which of the critics you read it's either a political indoctrination - period! - to train docile robots. It's a tool of the capitalist, industrial

economy to produce pliable w[illegible]. Or, it's a vast sorting machine which feeds an unjust economic orde[illegible]r, it's a mindless system with no real purpose other than providing jobs for narrow minded pedants who don't especially like children.

But, setting aside these historical debates for the moment, what can we establish about education in America today? Has it been the massive failure the critics describe? Is it irrelevant to getting ahead? Are students so limited by their home background that the school is ineffective? Does schooling make a difference?

Those who claim that schooling makes no difference make the following argument: The influence of home environment is so powerful that schools can't possibly overcome it. Therefore, what schools do is to act as a vast sociological cookie cutter, turning out poor children that become poor adults, and wealthy children who become wealthy adults. Those who accept the thesis that schools don't matter have invented new definitions of the purposes of the school. First, they say, they must be a vast custodial institution, keeping useless and economically redundant minors off the labor market. Second, they serve a credentialing function in American industry - rewarding those who are subservient with the proper pieces of paper so that they can get jobs, but, in fact, these pieces of paper have no relationship to the jobs. Thirdly, that they legitimize - these irrelevant schools - legitimize inequality by allowing the already privileged to feel that their position is merited while causing the rejected to blame only themselves.

But, then there is the issue of how and whether schooling affects occupational success. Again, the critics argue that the schools are irrelevant. To be blunt, this is simply not true. The more education one has the greater the chances of improving one's occupational status. Conversely, the less education one has, the less chance to rise in the occupational world.

The role of education is absolutely key. It serves primarily to free people from the constraints and handicaps of their social origins, and not simply to reproduce them.

One of the fascinating phenomenon that observers of the American scene should watch for is the difference between what social critics say and how people actually behave. After more than ten years of reading time and again that schools were prisons, that teachers are jailkeepers, that children's minds are being destroyed, the wonder of it is that anyone, that any parent is willing to send their children to school anymore. Yet, more Americans are in school than ever before, and more Americans than ever before are returning to attend schools long past the age of compulsion. This is the curious irony. The charges of the critics have hurt education budgets by portraying the schools as an ineffective rip-off, that people of all ages are voting with their feet to stay in or to go back to classrooms. Thus, if you judge the success of the school critics by the market decisions of parents and students, it's the critics who are irrelevant and ineffective.

MERROW: Historian Diane Ravitch, author of "The Great School Wars," speaking at a meeting of the American Federation of Teachers in Washington recently.

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BLAIR: If you missed "The Critics" the first time around, and want to judge their books yourself, the transcript of this program includes a bibliography of all their books.

MERROW: You can get a transcript by writing National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. A transcript costs 50¢. A cassette is available for $5.00.

BLAIR: Ask for Program #84, and, please, tell us the call letters of your NPR station.

("Teaching School Disease" sung by David Campbell)

MERROW: The song, "Teaching School Disease," was written and sung by David Campbell, and recorded by Jacqueline Sharp of member station WSLU, Canton, New York. Material for this program came in part from Connie Goldman in Washington.

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BLAIR: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is written and produced by John Merrow and Jo Ellyn Rackleff. The Assistant Producer is Katharine Ferguson. Technical Assistance by Bob Hock.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: And this is NPR - National Public Radio.

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MUSIC CREDITS:

"Education" & "The Hard Way" sung by The Kinks, Schoolboys in Disguise, RCA LPL1-5102

"Teaching School Disease," written & sung by David Campbell

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